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ABSTRACT

One method used to examine a target culture is to focus on a single region of a target language country, approaching all the issues normally raised in a culture class through the perspective of that region. The coherence this adds to class activities and overall class structure, the manageability of topics, and the opportunity to work with a range of authentic materials are advantages of the regional focus. A course using Brittany, a French province, as its selected region illustrates the method. An early class activity is the study of the region's geography and its implications for commerce and economic development in various directions. The course also focuses on a variety of issues in agriculture, the future effects of the European Community's single market, cultural problems in marketing and advertising Breton products, and banking and commercial identity in the context of a centralized government. There are challenges in structuring such a course, including the choice of an appropriate region, additional preparatory work for the instructor, and acquisition of adequate and suitable authentic materials for instruction. (MSE)

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Business Languages: Teaching Culture through a Regional Focus

by Frances Novack

Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (10th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 3-5, 1991).

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Business Languages: Teaching Culture Thrugh a Regional Focus

Classes in economic and business language are apt to be taken by a wide variety of students with diverse goals, not just those who expect to use the material in a practical way by later working in business or other French-related employment. This is especially common in institutions, such as small liberal arts colleges, which have the enrollment and staff only for a limited number of upper-level courses. Thus our courses need to be of value to students interested in learning about the culture as a whole, not just through the narrower prism of future business-related activity.

Focus on a region, viewing all the questions normally raised in class through its particular perspective, is one way to examine the broader culture in a business language course. Such a procedure offers many advantages. Concentrating on one region gives coherence to class activities and to the overall structure of the course. It also brings what students often perceive of as vast and frightening economic forces and issues down to a manageable size and piques students' interest as they respond as one of the inhabitants of the target culture. Further, a regional approach gives them the opportunity to work with an array of authentic materials, which adds to the illusion that they are area residents.

Subjects ranging from the such traditional ones as agriculture to recent issues such as European integration benefit

when presented through the regional focus. My course uses Brittany, France's western-most province, as the selected focus. It proves an informative and stimulating choice, as the following examples demonstrate.

The very first day of class can begin the regional emphasis. For many years, the course has begun with a blank map of France on which students have been asked to identify key geographical and cultural features. Studying the map gives them a sense of France's position within Europe and vis-a-vis the rest of the world. It allows them to see the link between natural features and economic development--not every place can support dairy farms or a steel industry--and helps overcome American students' amazing ignorance about even the most basic aspects of geography. (Often students, even those who've visited France, can locate only Paris among French cities and show no understanding that port cities develop solely near navigable bodies of water.) By this map exercise alone students see that Brittany stands out--as the westernmost part of France, and thus of Europe, and immediately through its association with the sea, which students intuitively understand. They also grasp its links with Great Britain. Questions about its climate and potential links with North America across the Atlantic also may flow naturally from an examination of the map. Since the region's isolation from Paris and much of the rest of France also becomes apparent, this becomes the natural place for early discussion of the Arthur legends and the Breton language and cultural identity.

The Breton focus enriches other aspects of the typical course. We'll examine the most basic, agriculture, and also look into future effects of the EEC's Single Market. Study of agriculture benefits from the focus on one region as it enables students to see the transformation of French life from its rural base in addition to the more purely economic aspects. The region is also tightly associated with foods students know and enjoy (e.g., crepes) and thus agricultural production is important to them in ways other products may not be. Brittany historically depends on agriculture (including fishing) as the mainstay of its economy and affords a good example of the sparsely industrialized areas. Indeed, because the land is not particularly hospitable, small farmers predominate. They have banded together in cooperatives, which are particularly eager to advertise themselves and their wares, so that students may easily study this form of social organization. Finally, agriculture has long been a preoccupation and a problem for the EEC, so that study of EEC policies, their effects in Brittany, and local reaction to them serves as a means of seeing the EEC at work.

Students also appreciate the particular problems confronted in marketing and advertising Breton agricultural products, heavily dairy and bovine meat, because of dietary concerns about animal fats. In the course we examine ads, which implicitly and explicitly address such concerns, familiar from American life. Then students peruse an agricultural cooperative's literature, which reveals how many facets of its operation, from its product

mix to research and development, are touched by health concerns. Because attitudes on such matters are expressed differently in France, students learn much as they research and play roles from consumer to grocer to marketing manager for egg producers.

Precisely because food products have such traditional associations in French life, activities with them lend themselves to unusual juxtapositions. Thus the succulent appeal of a producer's dairy products sparks discussion when shown with the Cancer Society's campaign poster on diagnosing the disease. Students also read and respond to a cooperative's letter which cites U.S. pressures via the GATT, EEC quotas, freezes, over-production, and the threat of Eastern European competition as its main challenges. So they learn about the "internationalization of markets" and the EEC's influence more forcefully than if they read any article on these subjects. They formulate possible plans of action, honing their problem-solving skills and increasing their identification with Breton farmers.

Skipping to the other end of the spectrum from the traditional agricultural issues, the regional approach also illuminates the future, as students try to comprehend the Single European Market of 1993 and its effects. While almost any aspect of the business language course reflects the enormous weight of Europe's influence, a special study of Brittany's views and plans for 1993 clarifies the tremendous changes set to take place. On the one hand, all sectors of the Breton economy evince excitement at larger potential markets and greater integration with the rest

of Europe. On the other hand, Brittany fears being bypassed as the heart of Europe passes along a London-Frankfort-Milan line. Brittany is positioning itself as part of the "Atlantic arc" which stretches from Portugal to Scotland. It is also attempting to strengthen links with the economic power across the Atlantic, the U.S.A., by improving its transportation infrastructure and facilities so as to be a first entry point for American goods and tourists. By representing assorted Breton viewpoints--many think the notion of an "Atlantic arc" which denies cultural differences to be a fallacious and harmful concept, of little potential economic worth--students grasp the impact and extent of the EEC's proposed changes on individuals.

Many other topics widely treated in the business language course also benefit from the regional focus. Banking forces choices among local and national institutions and raises issues of identity and the relationship with the centralized government. Decisions on business structure involve factors ranging from the transportation system to the climate. The study of marketing inevitably teaches about many facets of the regional culture. Successful products must take into account concepts of local identity, social class, and religious beliefs, as well as other historical and contemporary issues.

Having seen some of the ways in which a regional focus may enhance the business language course, it now behooves us to consider some of the challenges in structuring the course in this fashion. . The more crucial question is the choice of a region,

for it is the single factor which will most affect the course's success. Let me suggest some criteria which may help in choosing suitable regions in any country of interest. First, the region should be one the teacher is interested in, although not necessarily one he or she knows a great deal about. An infectious enthusiasm will help the students, but everyone's interest level can be kept high if the teacher is genuinely surprised by some of what the class learns about its economy and people. Second, the region should have a coherent perception of itself as a place with its own identity; the former French provinces lend themselves easily to such use. Third, it should have some outstanding economic attribute(s) which will make it memorable to students. These might include its typical economic mix, which would make it representative of the country as a whole. So being average becomes a useful criterion. Thus the Ile de France is not a suitable choice for study, although comparisons of other regions with Paris teach a great deal about France's socio-economic and political structures. Noteworthy non-economic features of a region also attract students to its study and help define it in their minds (the Breton legends and the architecture of the enclos paroissiaux come to mind). If nothing else, such features contribute to the tourism industry, one which almost all regions seek to foster and which plays an important role in their economies.

In addition to choosing a region, teachers should know that such an organization implies a great deal of work for you as

teacher. While every aspect of the class's activities must be evaluated from the regional angle, and appropriate materials found to illustrate them, teachers learn a great deal from preparing this course. The work becomes worthwhile since the benefits of this approach seems clearly to justify the effort expended. Up to this point we have discussed orienting an entire business language course around a region. It is worth noting, however, that a "piecemeal" use of the regional approach may better suit some of you. Thus one or more regions may be studied as illustrations of the economic and business topics which the class had previously covered in a more theoretical manner. If you choose to do a unit on a region, you will have the advantage of being able to tailor your choice to specific points you would like brought out, but the overall criteria for selecting areas are generally the same as for the whole semester. Letting each student select a region for study offers more involvement and freedom, but usually also means that students confirm their previous stereotypes of the region rather than explore its economic complexities (wine-producing regions are the big favorites).

Once a suitable region has been selected, one final concern remains--that of obtaining authentic materials for class use. The obvious source--visiting the area and acquiring material from different institutions and agencies--remains probably the best one. However, there are other expedients. One is teachers' friends, most of whom (or their children) will be glad to collect

materials which illustrate their daily life. This may even become a project for the foreign country's elementary or intermediate school classes, who will be happy to inform foreigners about their world. If the organizer prepares a list of sought-after materials in advance, teachers abroad may be willing to organize such material-gathering, especially within the framework of exchange programs of some sort. And the exercise of gathering materials about one's own region in the U.S. will give new perspectives on it and on the French region chosen as a focus. Closer to home, materials are obtainable through the French consulates, tourist boards, the Commercial Counselor, and acquaintances who go on visits.

Finally, French agencies or business which seek to promote themselves or their region, especially local Chambers of Commerce, are goldmines of information (generally, the greater their promotional interests, the faster they will reply to a written request and the fuller documentation they will give). Thus armed with ample local material without leaving the U.S., the business language teacher will be able to view the course through the regional prism, which should add both to the knowledge and pleasure of students and instructor alike. As an organizational principle for the economic language class, focus on one region has many benefits. It enables students to gain a more immediate perspective on common business subjects and new issues, incorporates authentic materials, and makes for a coherent course which students like preparing for. The regional

orientation should therefore be seriously considered by anyone offering a business language course.